

The Kelowna Community Concert Association ended another stellar season on Wednesday with renowned Canadians, Tenor Ben Heppner and Pianist John Hess in a magnificent program ranging from Lieder to more popular selections. They are masters at all genres.

They started the program with Lieder by Schubert, Schumann and Wolf, arguably among the best composers of their time. As you know, performance of Lieder is more than singer and accompanist; it is a true partnership between piano and voice, with neither performer taking precedence over the other. From the very first phrase it was evident that these two had captured that magical quality, that symbiotic relationship, which is the hallmark of great teams. As the evening continued this became even more pronounced. One expects the pianist to follow the soloist, but they followed each other, often in very subtle ways. Since my youth I have been a fan of the Lieder genre and worked with singers fairly often, but to me, this was Lieder at its finest.

Hess was impeccable all evening, negotiating challenging technical phrases with sensitivity and aplomb, performing delicate and thunderous passages with equal ease. It was a joy to watch and hear him.

Heppner is billed as one of the finest dramatic tenors in the world today, a well-deserved accolade. His is a "big" voice which he controls well, keeping the exciting edge even in the more lyrical passages. His range is large and he is equally at ease throughout his entire register, projecting the low notes and controlling the high ones, with very little evidence of forcing the tone. Indeed he was probably at his best in his full-voiced high range. Recognizing that much of the repertoire was of a heroic nature, I would still have liked some softer singing from time to time for contrast.

There were a few times when he seemed to reach for the high notes rather than hitting them squarely, and as the evening progressed I felt that he may have been tiring a little from performing such a challenging program.

After Intermission Heppner performed two typical Britten songs, full of spiky movement and atonality, followed by a rousing Barber song. He was able to effectively show us even more bravura singing and ringing high notes in these.

In the latter part of the evening Heppner showed his softer, more relaxed side with songs by Coward, Novello and Brodsky in; a near Broadway style. His singing was more lyrical here, well suited to the genre, evoking happy memories for me and hopefully for others. It was a perfect way to end a perfect evening, garnering hearty, prolonged applause and a standing ovation. As in the earlier part of the evening, Hess was outstanding. Both performers seemed to be having a great time, allowing us to just sit back and enjoy.

For an encore, Heppner sang a beautiful, soft, understated, humorous Ballad, giving us exquisite head tones.

An evening such as this is rare (not many performers have the ability to sing Lieder and then switch to another genre) and I found it to be a wonderful treat.

I have seen the line-up for next year and eagerly look forward to every concert.

Marvin Dickau is an Organist, Pianist and Conductor who has an A.Mus. from the University of Alberta. He has conducted choirs and small orchestras, given solo piano and organ recitals and accompanied many singers and instrumentalists in Kelowna and Calgary. He is currently Minister of Music at First United Church and Executive Director of the Kelowna Kiwanis Music Festival.